

The Deaconess and the
Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod

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A few months ago I was talking to a retired LC-MS pastor, and, for some reason or another, the conversation turned toward the deaconess program in the Missouri Synod. This pastor expressed some negative thoughts about the program. At that time I didn't know much about deaconesses, and had never really given them much thought. I questioned his negative statements. Without much explanation, he simply told me that the office of the deaconess violates God's divinely instituted role for the woman in the church.

Thus, a subject for a church history term paper was born, for I was still pretty much in the dark about deaconesses. Does the position of deaconess really violate God's divinely instituted role for women? What is a deaconess? Where did she come from? What does she do? This paper will briefly examine the development of the position of deaconess, her office in the LC-MS, and her changing role in recent years.

Phoebe (app. 58 A.D.) is most commonly cited as the Scriptural basis of the office of deaconess. St. Paul writes to the Romans (16:1,2): "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many, including me." It's interesting that Paul begins this list of recommendations and salutations in chapter 16 with the name of a woman, Phoebe. She was undoubtedly a person of some consideration, but whether or not she was an official deaconess is questionable. The Greek word in verse 1 is

δουλονον , which, in its basic meaning, is translated "servant" (as the NIV translates). Was St. Paul referring to Phoebe's fixed office or simply to her services on behalf of the community? Similarly, in I Tim. 3:11 (another verse on which the office of the deaconess is based) there is no agreement whether Paul is speaking to the wives of deacons or to deaconesses. Thus, it is impossible to prove from the writings of St. Paul that such an office existed in the 1st Century A.D.

A more sure basis which is cited for modern day deaconess programs is the service which Phoebe and other women of the Bible rendered. "The purpose of any diaconate must be and is: to serve the Lord Jesus by ministering to those who need help and care."¹ It's clear that Paul did recognize the work of women in the church and did approve of it. His praise of Phoebe has been mentioned. She was to be held in esteem by the Christians in Rome and held in esteem because of her service. Phoebe was a helper to many, to both their physical and spiritual needs. No doubt her service was one primarily of the church ("a servant of the church"), but it was probably also felt in the social order of things ("a great help to many people"). Paul mentions other women in this same chapter to the Romans. Among them is Priscilla, whom Paul calls his "fellow worker in Christ Jesus," and who had helped her husband, Aquila, explain to Apollos "the way of God more adequately." (Acts 18:24-26) Priscilla was undoubtedly well versed in God's Word herself, and used her knowledge to serve the Lord. Many other women, in both the Old Testament and

¹Shirley A. Groh, The Role of Deaconess Through the Ages (Fort Wayne, Indiana: The Lutheran Deaconess Association, 1955), p. 1.

New Testament, are commended for their various services to the church.

It's interesting to note that when Paul spoke of women in the church who rendered service, he usually spoke of unmarried women, women who were free from any other ties that could possibly burden their activities. It's also evident from what Paul says that these women, if they were indeed official deaconesses, "were parish deaconesses; they belonged to and served some particular congregation.... As parish deaconesses they were...especially to watch over the women and minister to them."²

Whether the office of the deaconess had been officially established already in the 1st Century A.D. is in question. We can be sure, however, that the office existed by the 2nd Century. In a letter from Pliny the Younger, governor in Bithynia, to the Roman Emperor Trajan about 112 A.D., the governor "mentions torturing two maidservants 'who were called deaconesses.'"³ The "Apostolic Constitutions" (which, granted, are not apostolic) also contain numerous references to the official office of deaconess and to the deaconess' many services.⁴ At this time the work of the deaconess seems to have grown to a much larger scale than the work of those Christian

²Ibid., p. 3.

³Frederick S. Weiser, Love's Response (Philadelphia: The Board of Publication of the United Lutheran Church in America, 1962, p. 18.

⁴John Malcolm Ludlow, Woman's Work in the Church (Washington D.C.: Zenger Publishing Co., Inc., 1866), pp. 20-21.

women whom St. Paul wrote about. Deaconesses of the post-Apostolic age acted as doorkeepers at the women's entrance into church. They were teachers. They administered to the sick, which, because there was no centralization of patients in hospitals, was no small job. They were...

"helpers to the sick and needy, laborers comforting the distressed and suffering--such as the martyrs and confessors in prison to whom they could more easily gain access than the deacons; (instructors of) catechumens; (assistants) at the baptism of women (who were to be completely anointed with oil before immersion); (they exercised) a general oversight over the female members of the church; (they were) hospitable--some had used their homes for gatherings and for entertaining fellow-workers of Christ."⁵

It was during this century that the practice first began of installing or ordaining a deaconess in a service which was marked by the laying on of hands.

The heyday of the deaconess probably came in the next three centuries. The diaconate flourished during this time and the office was given greater attention and recognition. In 451 A.D., at the Council of Chalcedon, a testing program for prospective deaconesses was set up. A minimum age limit was also set for the deaconess at this time. It seemed that the office of deaconess had really established itself. However, this success story quickly changed. All references to the female diaconate became obscure in the centuries that follow. The decline of the diaconate until the 9th Century, when it is practically unknown, is generally attributed to three things: 1) Because of the Montonist influence, deaconesses were allowed to preach--a job for which they were

⁵Shirley A. Groh, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

unqualified; 2)Moral danger beset the deaconess; 3)And (Probably the most crushing blow to the female diaconate), nuns in their monastic houses gave a large number of women a calling to benevolent work which replaced much of the former work of the deaconess.⁶ Thus the female diaconate of the first few centuries A.D. had, for the most part, died out.

Although Martin Luther did not re-establish the office of deaconess, he is given much of the credit for its re-establishment in the centuries after his death. Luther's theology of justification by faith is the basic framework upon which the service which a deaconess renders is built. Luther taught that a Christian is a new person, a person who lives a life of love and service. Faith expresses itself in love. Although the female diaconate was not revived by Luther, "diakonia, the sense of God-inspired service to the neighbor, certainly was, even if not by name. In fact, it was revived as part of the Christian responsibility of all men."⁷ Christian service became during the Reformation what it had been in the apostolic era, namely, the responsibility of all of God's people whose lives had been turned Godward in faith and manward in service.

The story of the re-establishment of the diaconate and its introduction to America and to the LC-MS is an interesting one. Numerous attempts at its re-establishment were made after the Reformation, but, because leadership was lacking in most cases, all attempts failed. Finally, in 1836,

⁶Ibid., p. 7.

⁷Frederick S. Weiser, op. cit., p. 32.

Pastor Theodore Fliedner of Kaiserwerth, Germany re-established the deaconess movement. For a long time Fliedner had been concerned with the social problems which he saw around him. In 1833 he converted a summer cottage into a home for the rehabilitation of freed female prisoners. Three years later, Oct. 13, 1836, on faith, he and his wife opened a hospital in a house in Kaiserwerth. One week later the first deaconess, Gertrude Reichardt, arrived.⁸

Fliedner was moved to restore the apostolic office of deaconess after hearing several suggestions to do so in the decades prior to 1836. He had seen the work of women in the few churches that still had deaconesses, and was impressed. On a trip through Holland he had witnessed some Mennonite deaconesses serving in this important office which no longer existed in much of Protestantism. Fliedner was probably influenced the most by the Lutheran Prussian minister of state, Freiherr vom Stein, who praised the work of the Roman Sisters of Charity, and who expressed to Fliedner the wish for a similar Protestant institution.⁹

Fliedner met with great success in Kaiserwerth. His original hospital-motherhouse grew into a network of some 30 buildings, including a chapel, a morgue, the center for female prisoners, a home for orphans, a kindergarten, an asylum for women, a training school for teachers, a girls' high school, and a preparatory school for deaconesses. The institution even operated a farm. In 1849 Fliedner retired from the ministry

⁸Ibid., p. 40.

⁹loc. cit.

in order to devote his time to the cause of the deaconess. By 1864, the year of his death, some 1600 deaconesses had been trained at his school. Because of Fliedner's efforts, the deaconess movement spread to Paris, Strassburg, Dresden, Breslau, Jerusalem, Smyrna, Constantinople, and to America.

Several men greatly influenced the deaconess movement after Fliedner, but, more than any other man, William Passavant helped to establish the female diaconate in America. Passavant had met and talked with Pastor Fliedner in Germany, and had decided that the service which the deaconess rendered was necessary among the people in the United States. In January, 1849, Passavant opened a hospital in Pittsburgh. Six months later, July 12, Pastor Fliedner arrived in Pittsburgh accompanied by four deaconesses who were to serve in Passavant's hospital and deaconess motherhouse. In the following year, May, 1850, the hospital, called the Pittsburgh Infirmary, was incorporated under a Pennsylvania charter as part of the Institution of Protestant Deaconesses, whose purpose it was to maintain the hospital and such other charities as might from time to time be started. About the same time, May 28, 1850, the first American deaconess, Louisa Marthens, was consecrated.¹⁰

The deaconess movement did not grow as rapidly as it had in Europe, or as rapidly as Passavant had expected it to. "Only a dozen consecrated deaconesses served in his Institution from 1849 to 1891."¹¹ Many reasons have been suggested for the

¹⁰Ibid., p. 54.

¹¹E. Clifford Nelson (Ed.), The Lutherans in North America (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 299.

near failure of Passavant's attempt to transplant the European diaconate in America. The church's disinterest is often suggested. Some say that Passavant did not provide the external organization that was needed for the diaconate to thrive. Others say that the problem lay in the probationers of the program, many of whom left the program after a short period of time to get married. "Yet one is struck over and over again with the fact that American dynamic society was not the place for the diaconate as it existed in Germany."¹² There was no surplus of women in America as there had been in Europe, and the American woman had more freedom to engage in secular work if she so pleased.

In spite of its shaky beginnings in America, the female diaconate eventually took off in the last two decades of the 19th Century and the first few decades of the 20th Century. In 1884, seven deaconesses from Germany arrived at the German Hospital in Philadelphia. Shortly thereafter the Philadelphia Motherhouse of Deaconesses was established, having close ties with the Ministerium of Pennsylvania.¹³ Deaconess organizations and motherhouses began popping up in several places among several different church bodies. The deaconess movement was on the rise. Much of the effort put into the movement was directed toward hospital and nursing services, but the deaconess movement around the turn of the century was also responsible for numerous girls' schools, kindergartens, old peoples' homes, and children's homes.

¹²Frederick S. Weiser, op. cit., p. 57.

¹³E. Clifford Nelson (Ed.), op. cit., p. 299.

There are scattered reports of deaconess services among Missouri Synod women in the late 19th Century,¹⁴ but the LC-MS, in connection with its membership in the Synodical Conference, officially entered upon a deaconess program in the early years of the next century. In 1911, in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, Pastor F.W. Herzberger of St. Louis presented a paper before the Associated Lutheran Charities suggesting that a deaconess program be started. Herzberger was a pioneer worker in the Lutheran City Missions in St. Louis, and had seen the opportunities for trained women in those missions. However, aside from stirring some interest in the program, Herzberger's suggestion had no results.

It was not until July, 1919, that real progress was made. Herzberger made another suggestion concerning a deaconess program, this time in pamphlet form, to the Associated Lutheran Charities. A decision was reached to organize such a program with headquarters in Ft. Wayne. A month later, the organization became known as the Lutheran Deaconess Association (LDA) of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America.

In connection with the association was an appeal to the Lutheran Hospital, Ft. Wayne, for permission to send candidates for the diaconate to its nursing school. Students would not only take nursing courses, but would also receive special religious instructions. The first president of the association was Pastor Philip Wambsganss, who had taken a

¹⁴James Albers, Perspectives on the History of Women in the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod in the Nineteenth Century, p. 34.

great interest in the deaconess movement in 1911 after hearing Herzberger's paper, and who had given Herzberger his fullest support. It's interesting to note that Wambsganss' mother, who was one of the first four Lutheran deaconesses to come to America, had been a deaconess trained in one of Passavant's motherhouses.¹⁵

This new Lutheran Deaconess Association met with mixed reactions. Some within the Synodical Conference felt that, as the female diaconate had gradually changed into a nunnery prior to Luther's time, the same thing could happen again. Others agreed that this threat did, indeed, exist, but because of the doctrinal stand of the Synodical Conference, such a corruption of the diaconate was next to impossible. In 1920, Pastor J.R. Graebner emphasized the great need for a deaconess program, and went on to state the purpose of the Lutheran Deaconess Association:

"There is, and has been for years, a crying need of women workers, in our city missions, our charitable institutions, and in our foreign mission fields.... The purpose of the Association, as stated in its constitution, is, 'a) to educate and train Lutheran deaconesses for care of the sick and the poor in the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference and for the ministry of mercy in the charitable institutions and in the Home and Foreign Mission work of said Synodical Conference; b) to erect and maintain Lutheran deaconess schools, mother houses, and other institutions likely to promote the purposes of the association.'"¹⁶

¹⁵Shirley A. Groh, op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁶"Deaconess Association," Theological Monthly, Vol. 1, Feb., 1921, pp. 49-50.

As the years went by, the deaconess program grew, became more organized, and adopted some changes. New training schools were opened in Hot Springs, South Dakota, and at Bethesda Home, Watertown, Wisconsin. In 1935, the entrance requirements for the deaconess program were changed. Students were accepted into the one-year deaconess training program only if they had first completed their professional training in nursing, teaching, or social work. In 1941, the length of the course was changed to two years plus another six months of training in the field along with Sociology and Psychology courses to be taken at Indiana University-Ft. Wayne. In 1946, the deaconess program (now at Valparaiso) became a four-year course with a religion major leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree.

The Lutheran deaconess had many distinguishing features. The title "sister," which was used in many other churches, was lacking here. There was no concept of a sisterhood, although there was a strong sense of fellowship among the deaconesses. The garb of the Lutheran deaconess was much like that of the nursing profession, and even though she may have had a full training as a registered nurse or as some other professional, it was still recognized that her work was primarily in the spiritual field. It was "expected of her that she be the assistant of the pastor or the missionary in charge with reference to the spiritual needs of the persons concerned, no matter whether or not her outward work is connected with material needs of the poor and underprivileged."¹⁷

¹⁷"Nurse, Deaconess, Social Worker," Concordia Theological Monthly, Vol. 8, Dec., 1937, p. 932.

In 1943 a new chapter began in the story of the Lutheran Deaconess Association. The Lutheran Hospital in Ft. Wayne could no longer spare the room to train and house deaconess students. The deaconess training program and motherhouse therefore moved to Valparaiso University in Indiana, the university affiliated with the Synodical Conference. The Lutheran Deaconess Association, although utilizing the educational facilities of Valparaiso University, retained its identity as an organization and continued to sponsor and direct the deaconess program.

With the start of a four-year course of study in 1946, the deaconess program flourished and grew. The change in the length of the course encouraged younger women to enroll in the program since it was no longer limited to nurses or other professionally trained people. The fact that deaconesses were allowed to marry, and that a deaconess was able to remain in the full-time service of the church and keep her title following her marriage also helped the program grow. In 1957, because of the rise in the number of deaconess students on the Valparaiso campus, a special dormitory and hall were erected. The deaconess students were organized into a sorority, Pi Delta Chi. Their curriculum, somewhat specialized, was controlled by the Lutheran Deaconess Association, but was integrated into the university's study. Two semesters of field work was done in a parish or institution in the Valparaiso area. The deaconess education also included a one-year internship.

Her training prepares the deaconess for work in various fields. She may be trained especially for the work in a

parish. A deaconess who enters this field might be expected to make shut-in or hospital calls, to organize the youth group, the Sunday School, or Vacation Bible School, or to head the evangelism outreach of the congregation. If the deaconess enters the field of foreign or home missions she is expected to be the assistant of the pastor or missionary in charge, and would probably be teaching in a mission school. If she were called into institutional work, her duties could be many and varied--nursing, counseling, conducting a prison or campus ministry, working in a social welfare agency, home for the elderly, or day care center, or conducting a religious tutoring program for the retarded. Certainly the deaconess of the past few decades has come a long way from being the simple nurse of centuries ago.

The latest chapter in the story of the Lutheran Deaconess Association deals with theology. It might be wise to first give a few details before unfolding a somewhat confusing story. The LDA is completely independent of church control, although the Missouri Synod, as the largest member of the Synodical Conference, might be considered the parent of the organization. The LC-MS, since the founding of the organization, had had a hand in the program. Its College of Presidents had been responsible for placing the graduates of the LDA, and Valparaiso University had given positions in their theology department, for the most part, to Missouri Synod professors.

The rise of liberal theology in the last two decades or so took its toll at Valparaiso, and the LC-MS started losing its influence over the deaconess program. The university

began filling positions formerly held by conservative Missouri men with liberal theologians from other church bodies. Thus, a liberal theology crept in. "Pan" Lutheranism was practiced-- LC-MS deaconesses would accept calls into congregations or institutions of other church bodies (i.e. ALC, LCA) which were also welcome to train their deaconesses in the Lutheran Deaconess Association. The duties of a parish deaconess broadened to the point where deaconesses were conducting the liturgy in the worship service and helping with the distribution of the Lord's Supper. Some deaconesses of the LDA, and even LC-MS deaconesses, went so far as to accept pulpit calls.

In the late 1970's a small group of deaconesses of the LDA "voiced dissatisfaction with the Valparaiso program and... urged the Missouri Synod to set up a training program under stricter control."¹⁸ This point was brought before the 1979 LC-MS convention, held in St. Louis, Missouri, July 6-12, by Pres. Elder Meyer of the Nebraska District. The Synod resolved to "authorize the Board for Higher Education to direct Concordia College, River Forest, Illinois, to establish a full deaconess training program on its campus by the fall of 1980."¹⁹

A new deaconess organization, the Concordia Deaconess Association (CDA), was formed on January 12, 1980. "Most of the 130 deaconesses in the LC-MS have retained their association with the LDA, but a number have joined the new association."²⁰ As time goes by, it will probably be more and more

¹⁸H.J. Vogel, "New Lutheran Deaconess Association," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 77, No. 2 (April, 1980), p.131.

¹⁹Convention Proceedings (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), p. 141.

²⁰H.J. Vogel, op. cit., p. 131.

difficult for deaconesses of the Lutheran Deaconess Association to join the Concordia Deaconess Association without a colloquy. Since the Missouri Synod has adopted the CDA as its deaconess program, it no longer places deaconesses from Valparaiso. Deaconesses from Valparaiso are now placed by the LDA itself, which receives requests for deaconesses directly from institutions or from local congregations. These congregations are, for the most part, of the ALC and LCA, but a few requests still come from LC-MS congregations.

The Concordia Deaconess Association has adopted pretty much the same course and curriculum which are used at Valparaiso. Of course, as was stated, the deaconess program in River Forest is under stricter control. Deaconesses graduating from River Forest also enter into one of the four traditional fields of deaconesses--home missions, foreign missions, institutional work, or parish work. In recent years both the LDA and CDA have had some difficulty placing their graduates, especially into local congregations.

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The Missouri Synod must be commended for its decision to begin a new deaconess program at Concordia College-River Forest. It was obvious that the situation at Valparaiso University would get worse before it would get better, and the LC-MS was bold enough to make a statement against the liberal theology which was so prevalent on that campus. Not only did they speak out against liberalism by organizing the CDA, but they also supported God's ordained role for women. Contrary

to the practices of some members of the LDA, the Bible says (I Cor. 14:33b,34): "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says."

The Missouri Synod's move is commendable, and their zeal to give women the opportunity to serve Christ and neighbor is also commendable. We know that women, too, as members of God's Kingdom, have been saved to serve. But I wonder if it wouldn't be safer to direct these women into some other area of service, for instance, into teaching or nursing. I'm not belittling the services which a deaconess performs, but I do know of several Ladies Aid organizations whose members, along with other female volunteers from the church, perform services much like those of a deaconess, i.e. shut-in and hospital visits, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School teaching. I've also heard many people speculate that the next great problem in the church, and even in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, will be over the role of women in the church. It almost seems that the office of the deaconess of recent years is begging this issue. In light of what happened at Valparaiso University, it would be wise for the LC-MS to handle their new deaconess program with great caution. We pray that the strict, conservative doctrinal stand on which the program was founded be maintained.

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